

Message Text

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S E C R E T BEIRUT 3270

EXDIS, FROM CHARGE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, PINT, LE, ASEC
SUBJ: THE DEATH OF TONY FRANGIEH

1. THE MURDER OF TONY FRANGIEH, HIS WIFE AND DAUGHTER MAY BE THE MOST SERIOUS BLOW TO THE LEBANESE BODY POLITIC IN MANY YEARS.
2. ALTHOUGH WE DO NOT YET KNOW HOW HIS FATHER, EX-PRESIDENT SULEIMAN FRANGIEH, WILL REACT, EVERYTHING IN SULEIMAN'S BACKGROUND SUGGESTS THAT HIS REACTION WILL BE VIOLENT AND BLOODY. THE POLITICS OF LEBANON IN GENERAL AND NORTH LEBANON IN PARTICULAR ARE A COMBINATION OF FAMILY FEUDS AND FEUDAL FIGHTING FOR CONTROL OF SERFS AND TURF, AND THE FRANGIEH CLAN HAS LONG BEEN A MAJOR PARTICIPANT. SULEIMAN IS KNOWN FOR HIS VIOLENCE AND CRUELTY AND THE STORY OF HIS HAVING KILLED 22 PEOPLE IN A CHURCH IN 1958 IS WELL KNOWN AND WIDELY REPEATED. EVERYTHING IN SULEIMAN'S PERSONAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND SUGGESTS THAT HE WILL NOT REST UNTIL HIS SON'S DEATH HAS BEEN AVENGED.
3. BECAUSE OF THE LONG-STANDING FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN THE ASSAD AND FRANGIEH FAMILIES, SULEIMAN HAS THE MEANS AT HIS DISPOSAL TO EXTRACT RETRIBUTION AND PERHAPS DESTROY LEBANON IN THE PROCESS. SULEIMAN'S OWN PERSONAL FRIENDSHIP WITH HAFEZ AL-

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ASSAD DATES FROM 1958 WHEN HE TOOK REFUGE IN THE ALAWITE MOUNTAINS OF SYRIA AND BECAME FRIENDLY WITH HAFEZ AL-ASSAD WHO WAS A MILITARY COMMANDER IN THE AREA AT THE TIME. AFTER THE TWO MEN BECAME PRESIDENTS OF THEIR RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES, THEY WORKED CLOSELY TOGETHER. ONE OF THE REASONS FOR SULEIMAN FRANGIEH'S RECENT ESTRANGEMENT FROM THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE LEBANESE FRONT WAS HIS REFUSAL TO COOPERATE WITH THEM AGAINST

THE SYRIANS. HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S BROTHER, RIFA'T AND SULEIMAN'S SON TONY WERE CLOSE FRIENDS AND IN FACT BROTHERS-IN-LAW (THEY MARRIED SISTERS). THE PRESS REPORTS JUNE 14 THAT RIFAT AND SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM HAVE ALREADY VISITED ZGHORTA TO PAY A CONDOLENCE CALL ON SULEIMAN FRANGIEH. ONE CAN IMAGINE THE SCENE -- THE OLD MAN ALMOST MAD WITH GRIEF AND FURY AND RIFAT SWEARING TO AVENGE HIS "BROTHER'S" DEATH.

4. THE SYRIAN ADF FORCES HAVE ALREADY BEGUN TO TIGHTEN UP THEIR CONTROL OF CERTAIN AREAS IN EAST BEIRUT AND THEIR INSPECTIONS OF MOTORISTS. ONE CAN ANTICIPATE THIS TREND WILL CONTINUE AND WILL BE FOCUSED IN AREAS OF KNOWN PHALANGE STRENGTH. AT THE SAME TIME, FRANGIEH SUPPORTERS FROM ZGHORTA WILL BE SEEKING REVENGE AGAINST THE PHALANGISTS. FRANGIEH'S "ARMY OF THE NORTH" WHICH HAS A MAXIMUM STRENGTH OF 2,000 MEN IS NO MATCH FOR THE PHALANGIST MILITIAS IN ANY HEAD-TO-HEAD CLASH, BUT FRANGIEH CERTAINLY HAS THE CAPABILITY OF PUTTING TOGETHER ASSASSINATION SQUADS TO GO AFTER PHALANGIST LEADERS. ALL OF THE GEMAYELS ARE CERTAINLY IN GREAT DANGER. IF THE SYRIANS SHOULD SUPPORT FRANGIEH'S EFFORTS BY DELIBERATELY HARASSING THE PHALANGISTS AND PROVOKING THEM IN THEIR AREAS OF STRENGTH (FOR EXAMPLE BY SETTING UP A ROADBLOCK/CHECKPOINT DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF PIERRE GEMAYEL'S HOUSE IN BIKFAYA), IT COULD LEAD TO GENERAL WARFARE BETWEEN THE PHALANGISTS AND THE SYRIAN ADF FORCES THROUGHOUT MT. LEBANON.

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5. IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW AN ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE CAN BE AVOIDED. UNLESS A MIRACLE HAPPENS; THAT IS, UNLESS ALL THE FACTIONS INVOLVED, PARTICULARLY THE SYRIANS, THE FRANGIEHS, AND THE GEMAYELS, EXERCISE THE UTMOST RESTRAINT AND PRESIDENT SARKIS IS SOMEHOW ABLE TO ASSERT HIS AUTHORITY OVER ALL OF LEBANON, THE COUNTRY SEEMS DOOMED TO DISINTEGRATE INTO CHAOS. LANE

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